Historicizing the Political Geography of the post-Ottoman Middle East: Social Conflicts, Competing Sovereignties, and Changing Territoriality.

With the outbreak of the Arab uprising and its devolvement into civil and proxy wars, most of the observers of international relations in the Middle East agree that the regional inter-state order stands as a critical junction (see Valbjorn and Volpi 2014; Fawcett 2017). Particularly, cycles of protest and repression and not only destabilized ruling regimes, but also put in question the reproduction of globally-dominant conceptions of sovereignty and territoriality in the region. Some commentators have highlighted the always fragile and contested nature of the Middle East state system and have associated the crisis with the long awaited failure of the artificial states imposed in the region by the European imperial powers following the First World War (Kaplan 2015; Ahram and Lust 2016).

In fact, the Middle East has often been treated as an exceptional case throughout the international relations (IR) literature. The conventional view in IR, shared by otherwise opposing approaches, is that the treaty of Westphalia (1648) enshrined the principle of territorial state sovereignty as the cornerstone of the European international order and marked the consolidation of a *distinctly modern* pattern of conflict and cooperation among states, based on mutual recognition and non-interference, which was subsequently expanded globally (see Osiander 2001; Teschke 2003; Kayaoglu 2010). The case for the exceptional nature of international relations in the Middle East compared to other region (Europe being the conventional 'ideal type' against which other regions are compared), centers on the argument that this particular pattern does not apply to the study of international politics in the region as a consequence of the tenuous hold of the conception of 'Westphalian' sovereignty in the region. One typical argument highlights the fact that the principle of territorial sovereignty – along with those of mutual recognition and non-intervention – has been the target of constant challenge by both sub-national (ethnic, tribal, confessional) and, more significantly, *supra-national* (Pan-Arabism and Pan-Islamism) movements and identities (e.g. Hinnebusch 2004: 151). Michael Barnett (1998), for example, offered an influential constructivist account, which associated the unstable and volatile nature of inter-state relations in the pre-1967 era with the conflicting 'social roles' of state in the region, shaped by the opposition between the principles of Pan-Arabism and territorial sovereignty.

If influential IR scholars such as Barnett and Gregory Gause III have argued that the Arab coalition's defeat in the 1967 war led to a gradual 'normalization' of international politics in the region as a result of the defeat of Pan-Arabism (Ajami 1978) and successful state formation (see Gause 1992), the regional uprising and its consequence have brought the discussion back to the exceptional character of the Middle East, defined endemic conflict, high border permeability, outside intervention, and the primacy of identity – with the exception that Islamism has replaced Arabism has the primary supra-national expression of collective identity.

In light of the challenges posed by recent events, my research project seeks to reopen the question of the transformation territoriality and sovereignty in the Middle East by drawing upon critical perspectives embracing a more fluid and flexible notion of territoriality understood as a social process (see Thuathail and Dalby 1998; Ellis 2015). The understanding of the historical origins of the regional crisis needs to go beyond easy references to the 'artificial' and 'failed' nature of states in the region and look at how the framework of the nation-states that has been imposed during the mandate era has been dealt with by local actors over the past century (Bilgin and Morton 2002). It takes a longer view of the history of sovereignty and territoriality in the region, using the sociohistorical method to reconstruct the historical rationality of actors and the recover of the contested meanings of the categories of political community, sovereignty, and territoriality during the crucial period spanning the transition from Ottoman rule to the formation of 'modern' nation-states.

The central claim of my dissertation is to *historicize* the transformation of conceptions of territoriality in the Middle East between the end of the 19th and the middle of the 20th century and highlight its *socially contested* nature. It does so by positing the following research questions**: what social forces (both state and non-state actors) were involved in the contestation and (re)definition of political community in the Middle East and how did their social practice shape 'practices of territorialization'? How did such competing strategies of territorialization in turn shape the transformation of the socio-spatial order (i.e. territoriality) in the Middle East ?**

From a methodological standpoint, my project seeks to develop a *historical-materialist* method for the deconstruction and historicization of the principles sovereignty and territoriality, rooted in the reproduction, transformation, and contestation of *relations of appropriation and domination* and the competing *strategies and practices of territorialization* among various social classes (see Teschke 2003; Lacher 2006). It rejects the conception – widespread within the IR literature – of international politics as a distinct and largely autonomous sphere of human relations in favour of an emphasis on how the social practices of actors – both elite and non-elite – are themselves generative of various 'geopolitical imaginations', i.e. how international relations are defined, interpreted, and acted upon. It therefore adopts a *radically historicist* and *agency-centered* approach which conceives of historical change in terms of the constant (re)production, (re)definition, and contestation of dominant social institutions by competing classes.

Therefore, the question of the transition from the Ottoman Empire and 'modern' state formation in the Middle East is reinterpreted as a protracted, socially contested process involving competing social classes with diverging conceptions of legitimate political authority and community, opposed projects of political, social, and economic 'modernization', and contrasting strategies of territorialization. It seeks to recover the contested meanings of influential definitions of collective identity – such as Ottomanism, (Pan-)Islamism, (Pan-)Arabism, and various expressions of nationalism – as various class constellations sought to mobilize such identities to bring about alternative and competing political and territorial projects. At this moment, my research focuses on the regions of

Syria and the Arabian Peninsula, and the history of what constitutes today the states of Syria, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia. It therefore focuses on the interactions between the urban oligarchies of officeholders, merchants, and landowners inherited from the Ottoman period (as described in Khoury 1983. 1987, for example), the evolving tribal and class coalitions headed by the competing Hashemite and Saud dynasties (and their struggle for British subsidies; see Kostiner 1993; Tell 2013), the 'middle class' of state-dependent officers and officials (see Khalidi 1992; Batatu 1999), the emergence of popular expressions of nationalism (Gelvin 1998), and how this shaped the early evolutions of the concepts of sovereignty and territoriality in the region. In doing hope to develop a critical framework allowing for the deconstruction of the question of sovereignty and territoriality in the Middle East that can then be applied to the current period of contestation and conflict.

I have completed the draft version of my main theoretical chapters, and I am now in the process of writing my first empirical chapter, which focuses on the social conflicts emerging in the late Ottoman era. Part of my research on the historical sociology of nationalism in Syria has already been published in preliminary form (see Viger 2018), along with central aspects of my theoretical approach (see Viger 2015). I have also presented my ideas in both national and international colloquiums and conferences (see publication list).

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